

Snatch & Grab – a short story by Robert Darke

‘What a star,’ Pete thought, admiring Dean’s approach. He was veering across the width of the pavement, from wall to kerb, on a bike way too big for him and looked so convincingly out of control that passing cars hooted. Earlier, Pete had seen Dean standing on the saddle of that very same bike, steering it in and out of oil drums with just his feet. The poor girl on the pavement clearly hadn’t a clue which way to turn.

She was maybe fifteen or sixteen, Pete guessed - at most a year or two older than him. He’d been riding his bike silently behind her, admiring her backside. She, oblivious to his presence, was strutting along in her high-heeled white sandals, her blonde shoulder-length hair bouncing in her own breeze. She looked like she didn’t have a care in the world. With each stride, Pete caught tantalising glimpses of a tanned midriff between her pink T-shirt and tight black skirt. He basked in the trail of her heady perfume; his bicycle seat growing more uncomfortable with her every step. She looked so cool. Pete wondered if he could persuade Damien, the leader of their gang, to give him some hints and tips on how to pull girls.

A whoop from Dean snapped Pete’s attention back to the present. He refocused on the white leather handbag dangling over her shoulder. Dean

closed right in, swerving erratically feinting first to the left, and then to the right. The moment had come.

“Look out, idiot!” the girl shouted.

As she twisted to the left to avoid Dean, Pete made his move from behind, snatching her bag. It was a well-rehearsed manoeuvre. In one flowing motion, he stuffed the bag up inside his sweatshirt. Both boys then tore away in opposite directions. Glancing over his shoulder, Pete saw the girl sitting forlornly on the pavement and felt an unaccustomed twinge of regret.

Five minutes later, he returned to *Mission Control*, their nickname for a near-derelict hut on a patch of inner-city land earmarked for redevelopment. Dean had already arrived. Also inside the hut were Wayne, Colin, and Damien. Damien was the leader of their gang; he was eighteen, just a few years older than the rest of them but many times more experienced. He had contacts; people who could move stolen credit cards, jewellery, and anything else of value faster than a rocket. If he was in a good mood, he allowed them to keep some of the cash from their pickings. If he was in a bad mood then look out; he could be violent and dangerous. Pete marvelled that someone as ugly as Damien was, with his acne and all, could still pull girls and make it look so easy. His face resembled something out of the school biology lab.

Like Pete and Dean, Wayne and Colin also operated on bikes. Damien had trained them all, one distracted the victim while the other grabbed. They each took turns at distracting and grabbing and had become proficient thieves. As Pete and Dean settled themselves, the others were busy going through a briefcase belonging to 'some businessman'.

Damien was unimpressed: "What d'you expect me to do with this crap? What were you thinking might be in here, Wayne – the crown effing jewels?"

Wayne ducked as Damien sent a folder whizzing past his ear.

"You ain't even got his mobile!"

"I thought it might be full of money."

"You been watching too many movies, my son," Damien said, the 'my son' was him trying to ape a cockney gangster that he'd seen in a movie. "Was it 'andcuffed to his wrist? Na, you wouldn't 'ave been able to grab it then, would yer, fool?"

"I ain't no fool." Wayne protested.

Damien caught him on the cheek with another file. "Come back when you've found something useful. Yer little..."

"C'mon Wayne," Colin urged, placing a restraining hand on Wayne's arm.

Wayne retreated nursing a cut cheek. Damien threw a stapler that hit the doorframe with a thud and showered them in staples.

Pete and Dean remained silent. They knew better than to speak when Damien was like this.

Damien looked at the girl's handbag Pete was holding. "What we got here?" he demanded, aggressively.

Pete emptied the bag contents onto the table. There was a door key on a metal chain with a pewter rabbit. Small mirror – cracked. Hairbrush. Makeup purse containing half used pink lipstick, powder compact, and black eye pencil. A red plastic wallet containing: Three pounds thirty in loose change; a ten pound note; phone card; two second-class stamps; a paper clip and a safety pin. In the zip up compartment of the bag was a notepad with the cover torn off; a biro with its lid chewed; a dog-eared newspaper cutting; a broken peppermint; a wad of paper handkerchiefs; a pocket diary – complete with addresses; a tiny free sample file of perfume; an emery board; an elastic band.

"Where'd you find this poor tart lurking?" Damien said, wrinkling his nose. He picked up the address book, flicked through the pages, and then burst into his manic laughter.

He grabbed the hairbrush, Pete got ready to duck and run, but instead of throwing it, Damien smirked in secret amusement, then put the hairbrush to his lips like a microphone and began impersonating the presenter from the TV programme 'Through the Keyhole':

“What sort of slag would carry an ‘andbag like this?” he whined, “Let’s examine the clues.”

Theatrically, he waved an arm across the table’s clutter.

Pete had seen him play this game before and hated it. He preferred not to think overly much about his victims, but nothing could put off Damien once he started.

“She believes in lucky charms,” he said, picking up the pewter rabbit, “but they ‘aven’t worked yet.” He grinned. “She cares about her appearance but can’t afford the look she’d like. She can make a tenner last all week but as soon as she breaks it, it goes. She saves make-up samples for special occasions but she don’t ‘ave many. She believes the Post Office treats all letters with equal contempt so only uses second-class stamps.”

Damien then unfolded the crumpled newspaper cutting and dropped it back on the table. “She has a newspaper cutting of her old man’s one published poem, she never reads it ‘cos she knows it by ‘eart. She carries this notebook in the vain ‘ope that her old man’s genius will somehow flower in her.”

“That’s enough!” Pete said, anger rising inside him.

They glared at one another until, reluctantly, Pete dropped his eyes.

Damien pocketed the ten pounds and the phone card and passed the loose change to Pete. He swept the rest of the contents back into the bag and

tossed it into the corner of the hut. "Now go and find something worth nicking," he said.

As Pete left, using exactly the same smooth motion as when he first grabbed the bag from the girl, he scooped it up and stuffed it inside his sweatshirt. He hoped Damien hadn't noticed.

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Early the next morning, having spent a night full of remorse, Pete knocked on the girl's door (having found her own address in the address book). Then he scarpered back across the road and remounted his bike. The girl opened the door in a dressing gown, she appeared to have little on underneath. She glanced down in amazement to find her stolen white handbag waiting on the step. Pete had earlier replaced the tenner and the phone card from his own pocket. She looked across at him sitting on his bike on the other side of the road and their eyes met. Then she raised her hand and, smiling seductively, she beckoned him across with the crook of her finger.

Pete melted; he could feel the colour rising in his cheeks. He felt foolish and tongue-tied. What could he say that wouldn't sound naff? He wanted to explain how sorry he was, and to tell her that he was going straight from now on. He wanted her to know he was not a bad lad really. He approached her with all the caution of a wild animal accepting food from a human for the first

time. Close up, she looked even more beautiful than he remembered. He opened his mouth but the words caught in his throat.

He never saw the blow coming; his cheek stung as her palm thwacked across his face. He thought that maybe his nose was bleeding. Reeling with shock, he became aware of someone else at the door. A familiar voice said, "What's up, babe?"

Damien was hoisting up his trousers. In disbelief and panic, Pete leapt back on his bike. The girl grabbed his handlebars but he slapped her arms away; his feet quickly found the pedals. Shame and fury fuelled his legs and as he sped away. Damien's manic laughter followed him along the road, ringing in his ears.

The End

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